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### **Environment Department is Committed to Helping Public Drinking Water Systems Meet New Federal Arsenic Standards**

(Santa Fe, NM) — The New Mexico Environment Department (NMED) is working with public drinking water systems across the state to meet federal standards for arsenic that become effective January 23, 2006.

On January 23, 2001, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) reduced the maximum contaminant level for arsenic in public drinking water from 50 parts per billion (ppb) to 10 ppb over health concerns associated with higher concentrations of arsenic in drinking water. Due to worries over compliance, EPA extended the effective date for the standard by three years to 2006, instead of 2003.

“In an effort to be out in front of this issue, NMED has been working with EPA and public drinking water systems through the state’s Arsenic Strategy for the last two years, holding numerous public meetings, on ways to meet the new standard by the federal deadline of December 2007,” NMED Secretary Ron Curry said. “The Department has been committed from the beginning to work with local communities and drinking water systems to meet this new standard and ensure public health is protected.”

Because drinking water systems remain in compliance until arsenic sampling demonstrates they exceed the 10 ppb standard, NMED will not collect arsenic samples from systems with historic arsenic levels greater than 10 ppb until late in 2007 to allow water systems additional time to achieve compliance. NMED has until December 31, 2007, to complete all drinking water system arsenic testing and submit those results to EPA.

Even if NMED determines a drinking water system is out of compliance, it will not accrue additional violations or be at risk for fines as long as the system establishes a compliance agreement with the state and follows its schedule to meet the standard.

Up-to-date information on arsenic levels and contaminant tests for all drinking water systems in the state are available through NMED’s new online drinking water database at [www.nmenv.state.nm.us](http://www.nmenv.state.nm.us) or [www.safewater.state.nm.us](http://www.safewater.state.nm.us).

Since 2004, about 20 public drinking water systems in New Mexico have made improvements, installed treatment facilities or replaced their high arsenic water sources and are no longer expected to be impacted by the new standard. However, the new rule will still likely affect about 73 drinking water

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systems or fewer than 6 percent of the state's 1,280 systems. The majority of the systems impacted serve fewer than 500 consumers, but about 700,000 people across the state will be affected.

New Mexico's prolific and naturally occurring igneous rock formations contribute to high levels of arsenic in groundwater in many parts of the state.

"About 90 percent of the state's drinking water comes from groundwater, which means it is often old water and in some regions has acquired high levels of arsenic from contact with the source rock," Curry said.

In the spring of 2004, NMED began notifying public drinking water systems throughout the state that exemptions to the federal standards would be granted if systems could demonstrate compelling factors prevent them from achieving compliance by the January 2006 deadline, such as financial hardship, or that water system upgrades won't be completed in time. NMED has approved three-year exemptions if these criteria have been met and if the systems also proved they are taking all practicable steps to meet the requirement and can demonstrate the exemption won't cause an unreasonable risk to human health.

Of the 31 systems that have applied for exemptions, four have received three-year extensions from NMED until December 31, 2008. Those include Los Lunas, La Mesa, Desert Sands and Española.

Another 15 systems, including the cities of Albuquerque and Rio Rancho, could also be granted exemptions. NMED has received EPA approval to continue to accept applications for exemptions beyond the January 23, 2006, deadline. When exemptions are granted, NMED must establish a compliance schedule for the system, but first must provide the public an opportunity to comment on the proposed schedule.

Approximately 25 drinking water systems have contacted NMED to acknowledge they will not meet the federal guideline by January 23, 2006, but say they plan to be in compliance with the standard by December 2007, and so have not sought formal exemptions from NMED.

Chronic, or long-term, exposure to high levels of arsenic in drinking water has been found to result in a variety of adverse health effects, including skin and internal cancers and cardiovascular and neurological effects.

EPA estimated in its rulemaking that reducing arsenic from 50 ppb to 10 ppb would prevent more than 19 to 31 cases of bladder cancer, and 5 to 8 deaths from bladder cancer each year; more than 19 to 25 cases of lung cancer, and 16 to 22 deaths from lung cancer each year; and a number of cases of cancerous and non-cancerous diseases, such as skin cancer and heart disease, each year.

For more information on NMED's Arsenic Strategy and affected cities and drinking water systems, visit <http://www.nmenv.state.nm.us/dwb/dwbtop.html>. For press inquiries, contact Adam Rankin, NMED Communications Director, at (505) 827-0314.

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